



## Episode 409: The Doomsayers Are Wrong, As Usual

Guest: Matt Ridley

**WOODS:** I was just telling people about your books, and in particular about *The Rational Optimist*, which, although several years old by now, repays close study. It's still extremely important. The themes raised in it are as relevant as ever. It's very fresh, and as I was also saying before we went on, it's a book, which when you read it, you're learning 10 things per page. It's exactly the kind of book I like to read. I have limited time, and I don't like books that are full of fluff, and we're about to enter a presidential campaign season here in the United States, and every candidate is going to release a book full of fluff that I would learning nothing from, other than I'm a fool for reading it.

**RIDLEY:** (laughs)

**WOODS:** But your book -- I've been marking it up, and saying, "Well, someday I'm going to have to steal this from him in a speech," or, "This is a great thing to do -- with attribution. I'm going to use this particular anecdote." It's astonishing the facts and figure you have. The case is absolutely overwhelming. So what I want to do in this episode is to focus on the case you make, in general, for optimism. That is to say, looking at where we've been in the past as the human race and where we are now, which is a place that is astonishing by any historical standards, and maybe take a glimpse into the future. But I want to walk through that. Your book also talks about the evolution of the institutions that made all this prosperity possible, and that's very interesting, too.

But I want to focus on the prosperity, because there are so many people, I think, who are completely misled on this. I'd bet if you went out onto the street and asked 10 people at random, "How do you feel we're doing against poverty around the world?" I'd bet at least 7 out of 10 would say, "Poverty is worse than ever." And yet that is so demonstrably false, I can't understand how they fail to grasp it.

So finally -- I know this is a very, very big warm-up here, but I think for me, the most effective moments in your book are early on, when you're really describing a typical family, a typical person living in the frankly not-that-distant past, and the kind of life that person led. And how absolutely unthinkable it would have been for us today. Can you start there?

**RIDLEY:** Yes. I mean, I set my fictional family sometime around 1800, and I say, "Look, this sounds wonderful: They've got birds singing outside their windows; there's no dioxins in the milk; they milk their own cows, etc., etc." But then I point out that the father is going to die by the age of 40, because that's when most people died. The child crying in the corner is about to die of a horrible infectious disease. The girl in the barn feeding the horse is getting pregnant by the neighbor's son. You know, there are all sorts of horrible things going on. My point is simply to illustrate how we look at the past through rose-tinted spectacles.

In fact, life was "nasty, brutish, and short" right up until 100 years ago, and right up until last year for a lot of people. I mean, in my lifetime, for the average person on the planet, their earnings have gone up threefold, in real terms. The average person is three times wealthier and is living one-third longer. Child mortality, which is the biggest measure of misery I can think of, is down by two-thirds, and the amount of poverty on the planet is down by about three-quarters in that time. These are quite extraordinary changes. But when I set out to write this book -- which, by the way, I wrote in the middle of the Great Recession in 2009/10 -- I was being a little bit brave in saying, "Don't worry; growth is going to resume. The world is going to go on getting better." Now, of course, growth *has* resumed. The GDP per capita in a country like Mozambique is 80% higher than it was at the start of the Great Recession, just seven or eight years ago. In Italy, it's lower, because it's still -- Greece, obviously, is lower. So, you know, countries can go backwards. But the progress in material living standards is quite extraordinary, and those numbers don't really capture what's happening, because we go faster; we've got faster communications; we've got smaller telephones; you know, everything you can think of goes on getting better.

And we take it for granted. You know, I complain -- this morning I was cursing the lack of a phone signal when the telephone call was dropped as I was driving along a freeway. Well, 20 years ago, the idea that you could make a phone call while driving along a freeway at all was --

**WOODS:** Right, of course!

**RIDLEY:** So we bank the improvements, we notice the things that are still not right, and we look backwards with nostalgia. And that obscures the extent to which people's lives have gotten better.

And by the way, I didn't start out, when I was writing this book, thinking that everything was getting better. I knew some things were getting better, and I wanted to write about it, but I also wanted to sort of capture what progress is and why it works in some things and not others. And I winded up with almost nothing to say that was getting worse. Obesity, traffic congestion -- a few things like that. But the things I thought I was going to be able to say, the important things that were getting worse, turned out not to be true.

Happiness is a good example. Lots of people think that people are getting less happy. That's not true. Wherever you look around the world --- if you get big enough data

sets, properly collected in the right kind of way -- as far as we can tell (and of course, you can't really tell how happy someone is) people on the whole tend to get happier as they get richer, and that's been going on in pretty well every country. So, as I put it sometimes when I give talks about this, I say that we're not only wealthier; we're healthier, happier, cleverer, cleaner, kinder, freer, more peaceful, more equal. More equal! That's the one that astonishes a lot of people. Everybody thinks inequality is getting worse -- and in some countries and in some ways it is -- but in the world as a whole, it's getting dramatically better. Global inequality is plummeting. Why? Because poor countries are getting rich faster than rich countries are getting richer, and so on. For me this has been a point of discovery, to really go and look up the numbers and pin down just how much everybody's lives have been improved, and to challenge the pessimism among those who say that it's not happening.

**WOODS:** All right, I have to throw in a couple of comments here. I've never accepted the maxim that money can't buy happiness. Well, of course it can't buy a true friend, it can't buy love, it can't buy certain things. But you're telling me I'm not happier now that I'm able to travel the world at will? I'm not happier with refrigerated food? I'm not happier that I can have the services of great chefs at my beck and call? If that doesn't make you happier, what's the matter with you? What *would* make you happier? These are all wonderful things, so I don't accept that. But also people will say that material things aren't everything -- and of course they're not *everything*. But they're something. There's no way I could cultivate an interest in Elizabethan literature if I'm one bad harvest away from starvation, and all my kids live in squalor.

**RIDLEY:** Yes, Gregg Easterbrook has quite a nice point where he says, "Thank you, Lord, that I am rich and comfortable and miserable, because I could be hungry and endangered and miserable."

**WOODS:** Yeah, that is fantastic. See, there's a problem on both the left and the right, with regard to undue pessimism. On the left, you have some of the, I don't know, maybe Romantics -- although it's hard to really classify these as "left" or "right" -- but you do have a kind of Luddite strain that you can find in some cases. Or it's not even Luddite; it's this communitarianism, the idea that, well, in the old days, sure, you didn't have flush toilets, but you had a sense of community that we've lost in the modern world. And likewise, you even see that on some of the traditionalist right -- with Ruskin or Carlyle and some of their descendants today -- who are right-wing critics of capitalism: it destroys community relations; it destroys relationships. And I don't see that that's necessarily the case, first of all, and secondly, they're obscuring the absolutely horrifyingly bad conditions in which people lived not very long ago. Can you imagine -- I sometimes sum up what it would be like to live in the year 1300 in just the word dentistry.

**RIDLEY:** That's very nice; that's very nice. P.J. O'Rourke made a similar point, I think. And you're right; the pessimism comes not just from the left, but from the right, and it often, as you say, takes this communitarian line. That, somehow we don't look after our friends and relations and neighbors today as much as we did in the past. Well, hang on a bit. You know, you go back to medieval villages -- the poor people, the

disabled people, the people who were educationally challenged, they were left on the scrap heap of history. I mean, starvation happened on the roads between villages every spring in Britain, a relatively prosperous country, right up until the 18th century, because nobody would look after the people at the bottom of society.

And it's not just that. It's also that the market system seems to me to be a system of rampant social engagement. It's a system where you have to be nice to your customers; otherwise, they don't come back. You have to be fair to the -- you know, you don't kill the shopkeeper to get the bread from his shop, because otherwise, he won't have it there for you tomorrow, etc. So this notion -- which you often hear from the churches, that somehow, unfettered capitalism has made people nastier -- just doesn't seem to me to be borne out. Just look at some of the things Steven Pinker documents about the decline of violence. Routine, random violence for entertainment, until just a hundred years ago, was quite extraordinary, and we don't tolerate that now. So we've become much nicer as we've got wealthier, too. And sure, we have different ways of looking after our communities, too, now. So people might fall on the state more, rather than on the family -- that isn't always good, but often it is good, because often families weren't very nice to their elderly relatives, and so on.

**WOODS:** Let's talk about a well-known episode of pessimism in history. And of course that's the episode with Thomas Malthus and the discussion of where population growth was bound to lead. What was he warning about and why was that not borne out?

**RIDLEY:** Yes, this is sort of the "mother of all pessimisms" in a way. Thomas Robert Malthus, actually -- because he used his middle name -- writing in 1798 said, "Look, the population is growing faster than the food supply, and that means that inevitably the only way it's going to get checked is by death and disease and war," -- "pestilence, war, and disease," as he put it. And so his specific recommendation was that we must encourage people to marry later; we've got to get population growth under control. And if we don't do that, then we're going to have to be really harsh. We're going to have to lock the poor up in such a way that they can't breed; otherwise, it's going to get worse. And this idea has been taken up again and again throughout the last two centuries -- that you've got to be nasty to people to prevent population growth.

Well, what happened, of course, was that the food supply expanded much faster than the population throughout the 19th and 20th centuries -- particularly in the 20th century once we got inorganic fertilizer to go. And now famine doesn't happen anywhere in the world. I mean, occasionally you get a food problem, like in North Korea or somewhere else that's really badly governed, but that's caused by politics, not by shortage, not by overpopulation. And it's quite extraordinary: We're feeding 7 billion people very comfortably -- so comfortably that the world food prices have dropped pretty dramatically in the last year again. And we're doing that while taking half the food that we grow and giving it to run motorcars -- well, not half, but a significant percentage. And so on.

So Malthus was wrong. He was wrong because of technology; he was wrong because of innovation. He misunderstood that, actually because of innovation, the food supply

could easily overtake the population growth. And in fact, the other way that he was wrong was that actually people would regulate their own population numbers, so long as their kids didn't die.

And this is the really great insight, I think, of recent decades, is the thing called the demographic transition -- that once you stop child mortality, then you stop population growth. It happened first in countries like France about a century ago; it's happening now in countries like Nigeria, where the birth rate is plummeting, because the infant mortality rate is plummeting. When people know their kids are not going to die, they plan small families, because they want to invest in each kid. It's only when they think that three-quarters of their kids are going to die that they try and have huge families. Obviously you've got to have birth control and education and all these things available to help people along the way, but the growth rate of population has halved in the last 50 years. And it's heading for zero by 2070, 2080, maybe a bit earlier -- nobody quite knows. So, you know, countries like Bangladesh are not far off replacement fertility, which is about 2.3 -- in other words, where each couple has about 2.3 children, on average -- and they're just a little bit above that now. Now, that's incredible, because just 50 years ago, some of Malthus' successors and admirers were saying, "We've got to leave the Indian subcontinent to starve. There's nothing else we can do for it. It's got to starve, so that its population comes down. Otherwise, it's not sustainable, and the world is finished." That's literally what was being said by people who are still around, people who are still trusted on these things. And they were saying exactly the Malthusian point, that was first made in 1798.

**WOODS:** I had a guest on this show, a pretty well known one -- Ian Anderson, of Jethro Tull, was my guest on Episode 3 -- and he's doing a new concert tour, in which he's raising some issues from the 18th century -- because the name of the band comes from an 18th-century agriculturist -- and he's raising the issue of population and food as one of these themes. And he said in a recent interview, we are heading toward 9 billion people, and he said we haven't got a chance in heck of getting 9 billion people fed. That simply can't be done. Now on the other hand, we can't tell people, you're not allowed X number of children, so we're just going to have to see what happens. So he doesn't seem to share Matt Ridley's optimism.

**RIDLEY:** No, well, it's surprising how resistant to the facts this overpopulation worry is. I mean, sure, when the population was accelerating upward -- up until about 1965, say; that would probably be about the turning point -- you could say that this is worrying. Obviously there's a point at which the planet gets full, or there's no wilderness left, or whatever. But we quadrupled the world population in the 20th century and ended up better fed and more comfortable at the end -- and, by the way, without taking any extra farmland under the plow. In fact, at the moment, the amount of farmland under the plow is falling, because we're so good at growing food, that we don't need more land. We're not even going to double the population in this century. We're going to increase it by about one and a half times. It's going to go from about 6 billion to about 9 or 10 billion. So we've got a much easier problem to cope with in the 21st century than we had in the 20th century. And we've got much better technologies to do it with.

Africa hasn't even yet started using synthetic fertilizer of the kind that has increased the yields of maize in the United States by about 10 times. So imagining what you could do in Africa would amaze you, if you could get fertilizer to that continent. I mean, some countries have started using it, but most of Africa is still not using inorganic, synthetic fertilizer. And once that happens, then, frankly, our problem is going to be too much food. We're going to be growing it from smaller and smaller acreages, and any marginal farmland is going to go out of farming and be available to return to wilderness or golf courses or cities or whatever it is we choose to do with it. But mostly it will be wilderness, because cities don't need to be very big. They're only about 3% of land area in the world.

So actually, I think it could be very difficult to avoid the fate that at the end of the century, we'll be very well fed, even at 9 or perhaps 10 billion people, and that we'll be living quite comfortably in cities with a lot of wilderness round about, as well as some farmland to grow our food. I mean, you could feed the world from a multistory LED-lit factory the size of Delaware today, if energy were cheap enough.

**WOODS:** Matt, over the course of the 20th century, there was a debate that actually used the words "optimism" and "pessimism," with regard to the effects of the Industrial Revolution in Britain -- what it had done for living standards. And of course, the pessimists argued -- and a lot of these were Marxists -- that it had made people's lives obviously more miserable; the conditions they lived in, the conditions they worked in had deteriorated. But the optimists said, to the contrary, that if you compare their condition to what they had had before, instead of just looking at a snapshot of their lives in, say, 1820, you'll find that, in fact, things had gotten better for them and might have gotten better still if resources hadn't been siphoned off to fight wars at that time. Where does that stand right now, and how would you make that case?

**RIDLEY:** Well, I think Deirdre McCloskey has sort of -- that the great economic historian, Deirdre McCloskey, of the University of Illinois -- has nailed that one firmly and finally in the book she's still writing at the moment, called *Bourgeois Virtues*, because she takes that on. And she says, look, come on, the Dickensian idea that the people who were living pretty impoverished lives in polluted cities in the 1840s and 1850s -- which as you say was emphasized by Marxist historians in the 20th century -- people like E.P. Thompson and so on -- that is bunk. Because we know that what those people were doing was flooding into those cities from the countryside, thrilled at the idea of being paid a wage for the first time, rather than having to live in a barter economy; thrilled at the idea of working indoors for the first time, albeit in horrible conditions by comparison with today's standards, rather than being outside in all weathers; thrilled at being able to work for an hourly wage, instead of having to work piece rate -- which is what happened with, say, the textile industry, in which a man came to your door, delivered some more textiles, and said, weave that into cloth for me, and I'll come back and pay you by the quantity you produce -- whereas, now you go to a factory, and you get paid for the number of hours you work. And that, on the whole, was an improvement for people.

Of course it led to abuses, and of course there were terrible things going on, etc., but actually, the reason people were rushing into cities and taking jobs in factories was because it raised their living standards. They didn't have to move to the cities; they didn't have to work in mills.

And it's happening today. If you go to parts of China and ask people why they are sitting at a workstation on an assembly line, rather than back on the farm growing rice, they say, "Because it's a better life." So from today's perspective, you look back and say, "Wow, that was horrible, the living standards," and maybe they'll look back in a hundred years' time and say, "You mean they had to put up with cars whose doors opened?" Or something, I don't know; there's going to be something about our life that they'll say, "I can't believe that they were forced to live such miserable lives." But you've always got a way to get the alternative, and the Industrial Revolution undoubtedly brought an enormous advance in living standards -- in Britain first, then in other parts of northern Europe, and in North America, and now this is what's happening in China at the moment, and India, and now Africa is beginning to follow suit.

**WOODS:** I did an episode of this show with Deirdre McCloskey, so I will link to that as one of the related episodes on the show notes page for today, this being episode 409 - it'll be [TomWoods.com/409](http://TomWoods.com/409) -- of course we'll also link to *The Rational Optimist* there. Before I let you go, what do you feel are challenges coming in the future, that maybe aren't going to destroy the human race, but that maybe are a puzzle even to you? And let me put in parentheses here, what about energy? Doesn't all this rely on cheap energy, and isn't that a potential problem?

**RIDLEY:** You're absolutely right. The supply of affordable energy is absolutely crucial to the improvement of living standards, and it's the one thing that's driven living standards upwards in the last 200 years. Because when you think about it, you and I have thousands of slaves working for us in the background, in the back room, if you like. They're not slaves; they're electricity. But they're driving machines. They're making us warm; they're producing the products we use, etc., etc. But if you turn that in to sort of watts of energy and compare that with how much you'd have to get out from muscle power, which is what most people relied on for most of history, then you would need thousands of people on exercise bicycles in the back room, with no standard of living themselves, in order to keep you in the lifestyle to which you've become accustomed. So thank goodness for fossil fuels, which provide 85% of our energy, and so on.

Now, it's pretty clear that, particularly over the last few years, that gas is not going to run out; in fact, it's super abundant. Shale gas revolution; we've got [inaudible] on the ocean floor, et cetera. Oil might run out in some fields, et cetera. Coal's going to last a long time. There's a problem with climate change, but there's nuclear behind that. I don't think we're going to have an energy problem in this century, but we're going to have political arguments about which kind of energy we should use.

The two things I really -- well, there are small things going on with our lives that I do worry about, like the epidemic of autoimmune diseases and allergies and things like that, a lot of which comes from the fact that our lives have gotten cleaner. We're not challenged by parasites, and that causes these diseases; I'm pretty sure that that's the issue there. But there are two big themes that I am pessimistic about, to a small extent -- or at least worried about. One is bureaucracy, and the other is superstition. I mean, if you look at what brought down great civilizations in the past, it was a combination of bureaucracy and superstition, usually. In other words, turning your back on the open society and saying, "These are the dogmas you have to believe," was a real problem for the Arab civilization, which was a wonderful flowering of civilization, and then became a benighted theocracy instead. Likewise, if you look at what happened in China a thousand years ago or so -- by far the wealthiest part of the world with enormous amount of innovation going on -- and then it all stops. And why? Because the Ming emperors basically bring in tremendously intrusive bureaucracy in order to control exactly what everyone's doing at every moment of the day, and ban people from trading overseas, and all this kind of thing. And the result is that you stifle innovation.

So there's a lot of both of those things going on at the moment. We're speaking just as Palmyra has fallen to an unbelievably benighted seventh-century faith in the form of the Islamic State in Syria. And so, you know, there are things to worry about. It would be possible to kill this process we've got going that improves people's living standards. It's been done before, not for the world, but for big civilizations in the past. It's possible that it could be done for the world. And that does worry me.

**WOODS:** The book we've been discussing is *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. Of course you can get it on Amazon; we're linking to it at [TomWoods.com/409](http://TomWoods.com/409). How can people follow you online?

**RIDLEY:** I have a website called RationalOptimist.com, and I blog there -- or at least what I do -- I write a weekly column for *The Times* in London, and I write regularly for *The Wall Street Journal*, and I always repost my articles there, so if people don't see them on the original websites, they can see them there. And I have a new book coming out later this year, called *The Evolution of Everything*, which I'm going to start talking about shortly.

**WOODS:** That sounds a little ambitious, with a title like that.

**RIDLEY:** (laughs)

**WOODS:** (laughing) Well, best of luck with it. Where are you in the process of writing it?

**RIDLEY:** It's finished. In fact, I signed off the index today.

**WOODS:** Well, how about that? Well, I love an in-your-face title like that; that is fantastic. Best of luck with that, and thanks so much for your time today. We'll link

people to your website, to your book, and all of this stuff on TomWoods.com/409, and thanks again; it was great.

**RIDLEY:** Great to talk to you, Tom.